

# **The Image of Frida Kahlo in Popular Culture**

When art historians finally began to respect woman artists in the 1970s, the most widely respected was Georgia O'Keeffe. A generation later that position came to be occupied by Frida Kahlo. O'Keeffe was a highly regarded painter in her lifetime. Kahlo was not. She was overshadowed by her famous husband, Diego Rivera. Besides, she was "just a woman."

This woman was no ordinary person. André Breton, leader of the French Surrealists, called her work a "ribbon wrapped around a bomb." Her psychological strength and artistic power were amazing. She visualized her horrific physical pain and her psychological pain with vivid imagery and with the spiritual strength which enabled her to transcend her suffering.

Her fame developed largely after her death in 1954. Looking back over the past quarter-century, we can see how a very large number of museum exhibitions, books and films have carved for her a solid place in history as one of the most important artists of the 20th century, both as a painter and as a sociological phenomenon. Museums and collectors compete vigorously for her paintings.

From the world of museums, books, and universities, Kahlo's fame rapidly poured over into the popular culture of Mexico, the rest of North America, and much of the world during the 1980s & 1990s. Among other things, she was the first woman artist to be the subject of a major Hollywood film - the Oscar-winning "Frida" of 2002 starring Salma Hayak. In terms of the general public, that film was only the tip of the pyramid of growing popular enthusiasm.

For women artists in general and Latina artists in particular, she is a heroine. To the physically handicapped, she gives courage to transcend. To the abused, she indicates it need not be tolerated. For the spiritually searching, she pointed to the sustenance she received from ancient Mexican deities, as well as Taoists, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and Christians. For many, she herself has achieved a status curiously like sainthood.

There has never been anything quite like what the media calls "Fridamania." A Google search yields 1,700,000 hits. One website offers 10,000 different Frida products. "Fridamania" continues to spread her legend around the world, and to paste her iconic images on millions of book pages, catalogue pages, posters, high quality reproductions, low quality reproductions, along with documentary videos and DVDs, performance pieces, jewelry, dolls, t-shirts, buttons, stickers, tattoos, tequila bottles, postage stamps, and web sites, as well as holy candle-holders and a remarkable number of private shrines and altars where she often is seen where one usually sees the Virgin of Guadeloupe. This exhibition of social art history is a survey of the remarkable "Frida" phenomenon.

Lanier Graham, Director, University Art Gallery, CSUEB